

COMMERCIAL GROUPEY FISHERY BUYBACK PLAN INITIAL REFERENDUM RESULTS

The proposed buyback and limited entry program was initiated by industry members working directly with the Congress to reduce capacity (both active and latent) in the portion of the reef fish commercial fleet economically dependant on grouper.

A grouper industry buyback committee drafted a buyback plan which it intends to use as the basis for seeking the introduction of a Congressional bill to limit entry in the buyback fishery, establish the terms and conditions of the buyback program, and implement a recent participation period requirement designed to negate latent capacity in the fishery. In order to gauge support for this plan within the industry prior to drafting Congressional language, a referendum was required.

The proposed buyback and limited entry program did not undergo the normal Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council plan development process including provisions for public hearings, or NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) proposed and final rule making criteria and opportunity for public comment. NMFS provided a sample ballot to the committee for use in the initial referendum, which the committee then modified to meet its needs. NMFS provided mailing labels of reef fish permit holders to the committee. All commercial federal reef fish permit holders, regardless of gear type, whose permits were active or available for renewal during January 2005, were mailed a ballot by the committee and asked to vote on whether or not they approved the proposed management plan.

The industry buyback committee recently conducted an informal industry referendum about its draft buyback plan to determine whether the draft buyback plan has sufficient support within the industry. The industry vote requires a super majority for plan passage (i.e., 60 percent). The industry buyback committee plan specifies the referendum be conducted using a weighted vote based on a given permit's grouper catch history derived from average federal logbook landings records for the permit's three most productive harvest years during the 2001-2004 period. NMFS assisted with vote tallying and will weight votes using NMFS data files.

Ballots had to be postmarked by October 5, 2005. The ballots were delivered to NMFS on October 11, 2005. Preliminary results of the ballots cast by eligible voters are:

Yes votes.....218 (38 percent)
No votes.....350 (62 percent)

Vote weighting by NMFS is currently underway. Results will be provided to the buyback committee and posted on the NMFS Southeast Regional Office Web Site <http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov>.